DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 340 970 CG 023 925

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TITLE Attitudes towards Gays and Lesbians: A Longitudinal Study.
PUB DATE 91
NOTE 19p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Attitude Change; *College Students; Higher Education; *Homosexuality; Knowledge Level; *Lesbianism; Longitudinal Studies; *Student Attitudes

ABSTRACT

As part of a new student orientation at a rural northeastern state college, incoming students (N=150) were surveyed in fall 1989 regarding their knowledge and attitudes towards homosexuality. Students (N=140) were surveyed again in April 1991 after four semesters of educational intervention. The results indicated that new students were uncomfortable with and lacked knowledge about homosexuals, with less than half expressing comfort with particular situations involving most feeling statements. Greater levels of comfort with homosexual matters and increased knowledge were reported between the time of the first survey and the second. One-third or more of the students were informed and were comfortable with homosexuals. Two factors, the necessity of dialogue, and having contact with a homosexual person, emerged from this study as strategy elements that can make a difference. Homosexual, lesbian, and bisexual role models are important in shifting the attitudes of heterosexuals. Based on these findings and other research it seems reasonable to conclude that many peoples' feelings can change as they come to know a homosexual person. (LLL)

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Attitudes Towards Gays and Lesbians: A Longitudinal Study

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Lesbian, gay and bisexual students have long been a minority; silenced, unseen, unattended to. Boyer (1989), college presidents, and other leaders have called for a campus community that celebrates the inclusion of all people. The fact remains; heterosexual students have difficulty welcoming gay, lesbian and bisexual students to the community (Herek, 1989; D'Augelli, 1990; Geller, 1991). The question is: can students be engaged in a learning process that enables them to appreciate and support the richness of a diverse community? More specific to this study are: the information, opinions, and feelings students have about gay, bisexual, and lesbian people and how that is contributed to by an on-going cross-campus educational effort? Simply stated: can a sense of community be achieved wherein lesbian, bisexual, and gay students are truly welcomed?

The authors of some college student-based homosexuality attitude studies generally encourage more research (ex: Grieger & Ponterotto, 1988; Reynolds, 1989). Grieger and Ponterotto (1988) studied students' knowledge of AIDS and attitudes towards Gays. (The title Gay is used to refer to gay, lesbian, and bisexual people.) They concluded, in part, as do others (Glassner & Owen, 1976; Hansen, 1982; Millham, San Miguel & Kellogg, 1976; Kite, 1984; Alston, 1974; Larsen, Cate, & Reed, 1983), that attitude is associated with gender, religion and being close to someone Gay. Attitudes gathered at several campuses verify the common assumption that feelings towards Gays are negative (Herek, 1989; D'Augelli, 1990). A survey by Geller (1991) indicated that students lacked knowledge and the majority claimed not to have formulated opinions. If these attitudes are to change, then those of frontline staff, like resident assistants, are important. Unfortunately their attitudes appear to reflect those of the general student body (D'Augelli, 1989). Longitudinal studies which track changes in student attitudes appear nearly nonexistent. Astin's yearly work (1990) on nationwide college norms includes one item: "it is important to have laws prohibiting homosexual relationships." It seems that no one has tried to measure over time the impact of

an on-going educational program.

One conclusion based on this literature review and the calls for communities to celebrate civility and diversity is that some form of an educational effort is needed. The question that remains is: will a broad educational program lead to changed attitudes and to increased knowledge? This study examines the knowledge and attitudes of new students upon entry and again after four semesters of educational intervention.

The educational effort is aimed at the general student body and uses three major strategies: special bulletin boards, overhead messages in high traffic areas, and material written by gay students. A variety of offices apply strategies in three general categories: direct contact, staff development, and classroom. The efforts are all designed to generate daily dialogue on some aspect of the topic. The assumption is that continuous communication in all corners of the campus is necessary for learning and change. The details of the educational effort are described by Geller (1991).

A series of hypotheses focus this author's research. First, a majority of new students are uncomfortable with Gays, and lack knowledge about them. A secondary hypothesis is: there is an initial core of students who are informed and are comfortable with Gays. If this second hypothesis is supported, then there is a group of students who will aid the educational effort aimed at increasing knowledge and comfort level. The general null hypothesis is: even with a new cross-campus education program, there will be no difference between the 1989 and 1991 survey results as they pertain to comfort with and knowledge about Gays.

METHODS

PARTICIPANTS

As part of Fall 1989 new student orientation at a rural northeastern state

college all students were randomly assigned in groups of 15 to an upperclass peer facilitator. They distributed an estimated 300 surveys in an entering class of 450 students. As soon as 150 usable surveys were returned no effort was made to collect more.

In late April 1991 the same population was again surveyed with the same instrument, excepting three additional questions. The students completed the survey while waiting to register for Fall 1991 classes. Of the original class of 450, 304 were still enrolled. There were 140 usable surveys, a return rate of 46%. The class continued to have 76% women and 24% men; this ratio was retained in both samples.

INSTRUMENT & PROCEDURES

The instrument is composed of 20 questions. Ten questions focus on knowledge and opinion. The other 10 questions, influenced by the work of Hudson and Rickets (1980), are "I" statements pertaining to personal feeling. The response categories are strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree and strongly disagree.

The surveys are tabulated with frequency counts. For ease of analysis the categories for "agree" are combined as are those for "disagree". Since interest focused on particular feelings and specific aspects of knowledge, no attempt is made to generate an overall score. The chi square analysis is used to compare the distribution of the two sets of student responses on each question.

RESULTS

FEELINGS

In general a large number of students (30-40%) responded neutral on the 1989 survey (see Table 1). The 1991 survey responses indicate a greater comfort level with gay matters. This shift is statistically significant for 6 of 10 feeling statements.

The significant changes pertain to respect and personal associations.

Students are increasingly uncomfortable (53% - 64%) when Gays are made fun of (statement 5) and more comfortable (47% - 60%) telling a group of friends to stop making fun of Gays (statement 3). In the working or teaching environment (statements 7, 17, 13) 44 - 50% of the students in 1991 compared to one third of them in 1989 are comfortable with a homosexual boss or colleague or teacher. Originally, students (66%) would be very upset if they learned a brother or sister is homosexual (statement 9), but in 1991, 49% feel that way.

For the remaining questions there is no change in the response pattern. Nearly a majority of the students remain disgusted when they see two people of the same sex holding hands (statement 1, 11). At parties some students (40-48%) will talk with a homosexual (statement 15), but a third are neutral. Students (30 - 39%) remain uncomfortable if they learn that a best friend of the same sex is homosexual (statement 19).

The summary statements (21, 22) revealed that 53% of the student have become more comfortable with gay people and issues, and for 46% their attitude has become more positive. The level of disagreement on these two questions ranges from 12-15%.

OPINION / KNOWLEDGE

There is a significant difference between 1989 and 1991 on four of the 10 statements. Students have increased their knowledge about homosexuality and their opinions reflect greater or continuing support for gays. Student responses in the neutral category are noticeably lower in 1991 (see Table 2).

In terms of general opinion, students (76%) continue to believe that homosexuals should be entitled to the same legal and financial benefits as heterosexuals (statement 12). Furthermore, students (66%) remain understanding of the fact that homosexual relationships can be just as loving and caring as heterosexual relationships (statement 20). Only 7% disagree. The majority of students (58%) hold to the belief that it is preferable to be heterosexual

(statement 2). Another 25% are neutral. Some students (54%) continue to disagree that homosexual behavior is immoral. About 25% agree that it is immoral. Students (50%) no longer feel (significant change) that it is important to find out how to prevent homosexuality (statement 4).

The responses to matters that are often labeled as myths about homosexuality reveal students are aware or have significantly increased their knowledge. Two thirds of the students already know that homosexuality is not a sign of mental illness (statement 8). Students (61%) now understand that with therapy homosexuals cannot be heterosexuals (statement 18). The neutral category dropped from 48% to 30%. On the subject of unusually strong sex drives (statement 14) there is a similar precipitous drop (74 to 43%); students (52%) do not agree that homosexuals have unusually strong sex drives. Seventy percent of the students now disagree with the statement that homosexuals are interested in "converting" heterosexuals to their lifestyle (statement 10). Students remain unmoved (46% neutral) as to whether or not homosexuals will always stand up for each other regardless of the issues (statement 16).

CONCLUSIONS

The results support the hypothesis pertaining to the 1989 survey. New students are uncomfortable with and lack knowledge about Gays. For all but one feeling statement (5), less than 50% of the students express comfort with a particular situation. Only three (8, 10, 20) of six knowledge statements (18, 8, 10, 20, 16, 14) have responses that are accurate. The secondary hypothesis states that there would be a core of students who are informed and are comfortable with Gays. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that one third or more of the students fall in this category on seven (15, 3, 5, 7, 17, 13, 19) of the 10 feeling statements and four (18, 8, 10, 20) of six knowledge statements. The overall combination of these results indicate that an educational effort is needed

and it has the potential of being supported by a core of people.

The null hypothesis, that there is no change in students as it pertains to comfort with and knowledge about gays is rejected. There is a significant difference between the two sets of response patterns on 6 of the 10 feeling statements and on 4 of the 10 opinion and knowledge statements. A broad campus-wide educational effort can stimulate positive change, but there is still roughly 50% of the students who are uncomfortable and somewhat fewer who lack basic knowledge. The change is exciting, but it is not enough.

DISCUSSION

Two factors, the necessity of dialogue and having contact with a gay person, emerge from this study as strategy elements that can make a difference. According to Hill (1991) they are necessities for institutions dedicated to pluralism. In this study the importance of the factors is evident at the initial stage. A high percentage of neutral student responses exist on virtually every item of the 1989 survey. For some knowledge statements it may be that students lack facts or are unsure of information or do not care. The feeling statements may be interpreted as students not wanting to commit themselves or not having considered the situation or not being sure of their feelings or not caring. Regardless of the reason, on-going dialogue and interaction with gay people are necessary for change.

Gay, lesbian, and bisexual role models are important in shifting the attitudes of heterosexuals. Some studies (Grieger & Ponterotto, 1988; Herek, 1988; Lance, 1987) have found a positive relationship between celebrative attitudes and knowing a gay person. Consequently, based on these findings and work by Lance (1987) it seems reasonable to conclude that many peoples' feelings can change as they come to know a Gay. This conclusion appears to be supported in part by the forty-one students who responded to the open ended question: has

anything influenced your thinking about gay, lesbian or bisexual people in the last two years? The most common response is a variation on the theme of knowing a Gay. These are not public coming outs, rather one to one interactions that apparently have caused a number of heterosexuals to reflect on past feelings. What is public (and appreciated as stated by our gay and lesbian community) is when the heterosexual friends make a request in support of gay people.

The increase in the number of students who claim they will tell others to stop making fun of Gays (statements 3, 5) is impressive. Given that level of response (60%) it is interesting that 48% of the students are still not comfortable talking to a Gay at a party (statement 15). Three factors may be involved. Students clearly support equal legal rights for Gays (statement 12). "Stop making fun-of-Gays" may be akin to support for legal rights; simply a "justice-for-all" expression which suggests mere tolerance or intellectually right. Secondly, these new students probably know few gay students for they first come out during their college years (Hetrick & Martin, 1987; D'Augelli, 1991). Typically, it is college juniors and seniors that are out. Thus, most students have never experienced a dialogue with a gay person and are unsure about doing so, even if presented with an opportunity. Compounding the situation may be both the myth that, if one associates with Gays, one must be one, and the lack of knowing how the community views people who do talk to Gays. Doing survey work and sharing the results with the campus can help dispel the myth and provide a general sense of the community's feeling.

The impact of "knowing-a-gay-person" is also supported by the changes in this study's neutral responses. While the 1989 survey has 30-40% responding in the neutral category, the 1991 survey has 25-30%. The response to "loving relationships" (statement 20) and "converting" (statement 10) suggests that students may have had some form of direct or indirect contact with Gays. The significant changes in responses to comfort statements pertaining to working with

(statement 7) or being supervised (statement 17) by a gay person also support the supposition. In terms of a work colleague, boss, and teacher students (52%) are most comfortable with a Gay teacher (statement 13). This may be because faculty are more visible as role models than are the professionals on the campus surveyed.

Contact with gay topics and students may also influence the neutral pattern's one exception: being upset if one learned a brother or sister is homosexual (statement 9). The neutral response increased radically and the agree category decreased markedly. This campus' educational program has created on-going dialogue which is full of sad stories and hurtful responses. As gay students share the pain of rejection by families, churches, and friends, and heterosexual students hear the comments, the reasons for silence may be more obvious.

An area in which there are no visible campus role models and there is no movement is public hand holding. Visible displays of affection between two men especially, but also two women, are something heterosexual students are not comfortable with. For the gay community the harassment for showing any form of public affection for a loved one is particularly painful. One response to the harassment is a public display of affection event (PDA) such as on this campus in April 1991. This is a gay event, designed for Gays to affirm their right to express public affection in much the way heterosexuals do. Only secondarily do gay students at this campus see a PDA as an educational strategy.

Not surprising is that the majority of students (63%) continue to agree it is preferable to be heterosexual (statement 2). The opinion that it is preferable to be one versus another suggests that some people recognize an inequality or differential treatment or both. The magnitude of the student response seems to parallel the gay students' and faculty expression at this campus that it is a risk to be out. While the campus' educational program has not eliminated the risk of being out, it does enable Gays to know where support is among students, faculty, and staff. Many students have stated that there is a more supportive environment

at this institution than they have found in other communities.

The statement on the immorality of homosexual behavior raises a question. If one disagrees that homosexual behavior is immoral, does that mean homosexual behavior is moral? Not necessarily is the safest interpretation. Some people may not wish to label it immoral, but they may be unwilling to call it moral. Morality is generally based on one's religion and culture. Therefore, some students and educators may believe that what is morally right for one may not be for another. In terms of raw numbers there was movement away from citing homosexual behavior as immoral, but it was not significant.

Myths do not disappear easily, but there was significant gain in knowledge that dispels myths. However, the large number of neutral responses (25%) after four semesters of education indicate that students still need basic information about Gays. The specific areas for continued education as identified in the '91 survey include the myths involving use of therapy, preventing homosexuality, understanding sex drives, and converting homosexuals. Most students continue to believe that homosexuality is not a mental illness and that Gays should have the same legal and financial benefits as heterosexuals.

For the gays, lesbian and bisexual community there is still a major unexplored question. Completing a survey is an intellectual exercise. How will these students, many of whom have "less-judgmental-responses", actually respond when, for example, someone is mocking a Gay in public? This study provides no statistical evidence, but observations of some students on this campus provide some encouraging indicators. One example is the public display of affection in mid-April 1991. Seven gay students engaged in hugging before a large crowd. When they asked for supporters to come forward to join them, 50 or more people, mostly students, responded. Others have chosen to speak positively at other times through petitions of support and written public comments. This is not to say that all the hurtful comments and activity have disappeared, but their impact is

tempered by another voice, one of support. One more staff person has come out and now serves as a role model. More students, juniors and seniors are out and they also serve as role models. There is fear about being out and some heterosexuals, who wish to support the gay community, fear doing so. These facts suggest the community still does not welcome Gays and sustains gay people's hesitancy to openly acknowledge their sexual orientation and serve as role models. This study's findings are not unique.

Before extending these results to another campus two independent factors deserve consideration: gender and religion. Certainly there are devotedly religious students on campus, but no more than might be expected at any state supported institution in a rural conservative northeastern community. Religion is a factor that influences attitudes toward gays and lesbians (Alston, 1974; Larsen, Cate, & Reed, 1983). Secondly, women have generally more positive attitudes towards the gay community than men do (Kite, 1984; Herek, 1988; D'Augelli and Rose 1990). The samples in this study are not stratified on the basis of gender. However, the nature of the class surveyed and the samples drawn, 75% women and 25% men, probably influences the generally positive movement in this study.

Clearly there has been a change in feelings and basic knowledge level has increased. However, is it the educational effort based on dialogue that has made the difference? This study does not answer that question. One could argue that in the natural on-going development of a person, these same results would be achieved. This seems unlikely when one considers the societal atmosphere that has existed for years. More plausible and supported by observation on this campus is that the educational effort has unleashed a chain reaction. This program has created dialogue across campus; students listen to the community speak; straight students react to the narrow mindedness expressed by others; the administration has made a commitment to gay students; through this dialogue gay students learn who supports them; they share their stories with a few close friends; gay students

express their views personally and anonymously; more gay students and staff are out on campus; the gay students form their own groups, some closed and others not; money is provided by student government and administration; more gay students come out to other gay students; more gay and straight students interact, the administration continues to engage the community in dialogue. Thus, there is no single effort to which to attach the change, but there is a central theme, continuous on-going dialogue that creates a forum of confirmation for gay students. This milieu brings forth more gay people who speak openly and provide models of behavior. As in other studies the chance to hear and know a gay person is all powerful. Furthermore, it speaks to the need for gay student personnel professionals to feel their institutions are safe so they can serve as visible role models and student development specialists for the gay and non-gay community.

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TABLE 2

Summary of Percent* of Responses to Attitude Survey: Knowledge

	Knowledge Statements	Students, September 1, 1989 N = 150 Agree Strongly Agree	Neutral	Disagree or Strongly Disagree	Chi-Square	Students, April 30, 1991 N = 140 Agree or Strongly Agree	Neutral	Disagree or Strongly Disagree
2.	It is preferable to be heterosexual rather than homosexual.	63	25	12	1.55 p=.46	38	26	17
6.	Homosexual behavior is immoral.	30	29	41	5.44 p=.06	22	23	54
18.	With therapy, homosexuals can become heterosexuals.	11	48	41	12.84 p=.001	8	30	62
4.	It is important to find out how to prevent homosexuality.	24	41	35	7.00 p=.03	20	29	50
8.	Homosexuality is not a sign of mental illness.	67	20	13	4.47 p=.10	83	17	7
10.	Homosexuals are interested in "converting" heterosexuals to their lifestyle.	5	44	51	12.12 p=.002	5	24	70
16.	Homosexuals will always stand up for each other regardless of the issue.	24	49	27	5.55 p=.06	14	47	38
14.	Homosexuals have unusually strong sex drives.	6	74	20	34.01 p=.001	4	43	53
20.	Homosexual relationships can be just as loving and caring as heterosexual relationships.	54	33	13	5.49	66	26	7
12.	Homosexuals should be entitled to the same legal and financial benefits as hetersoexuals.	67	21	12	3.21 p=.20	76	14	10

*Note percents are printed here, but the Chi-Square is figured from the frequency count.

TABLE 1

Summary of Percent* of Responses to Attitude Survey: Feelings

Feeling Statements	Students, September 1, 1989 N = 150				Students, April 30, 1991 N = 140		
	Agree Strongly Agree	Neutral	Disagree or Strongly Disagree	Chi-Square	Agree or Strongly Agree	Neutral	Disagree or Strongly Disagree
1. If I saw two women holding hands in public I would fee disgusted.	42	41	17	3.08 p=.21	37	38	25
11. If I saw two men holding hands in public I would feel disgusted.	53	30	17	1.58 p=.45	48	29	22
15. I would feel at ease talking with a homosexual at a party.	40	34	26	2.71 p=.25	48	32	19
3. I am comfortable telling a group of friends to stop making fun of gays and lesbians.	47	42	11	10.34 p=.005	60	24	15
5. I am uncomfortable when others make fun of homosexuals, but I am afraid if I say anything I'll be labeled as a homosexual.	7	40	53	6.7 p=.03	10	26	64
7. I would feel comfortable working closely with a male or female homsexual.	34	33	33	5.77 p=.05	44	35	20
17. I would feel uncomfortable if I learned that my boss was homosexual.	35	30	35	6.4 p=.04	22	31	46
13. I would feel uncomfortable if I learned that my teacher was a lesbian.	33	30	37	6.4 p=.04	22	26	52
9. I would be upset if I learned my brother or sister was homosexual.	66	17	17	8.78 p=.01	49	28	22
19. I would feel uncomfortable if I learned that my best friend of my sex was homosexual.	30	29	41	2.76 p=.25	39	25	36
21. In the last two years I have become more comfortable with G/L/B people and issues.					53	34	12
22. In the last two years my attitude toward G/L/B people has become more positive.					47	38	15